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ABSTRACT

We can identify black culture in terms of certain institutions and values which they share as members of an ethnic group, while recognizing that individual families and communities identify in important respects with other groups. The ascription of a humanistic character--defined as those values and institutions which black Americans have in common that are not shared by the majority of Americans--is a prevalent theme in the black movement. This view is counterposed to that of American society generally as materialistic in its emphasis. Humanism refers to a recognition of essential human characteristics--experience, feelings, a sense of personal worth--as contrasted with an instrumental evaluation in terms of success, competence, "personality". As an alternative to pejorative or apologetic approaches to the study of black society, anthropologists might consider the proposition that black Americans, constituting a minority that has been, in turn, despised, patronized, or tolerated, but never granted full membership in this society, have nevertheless maintained a tradition in which personal and social integrity, as expressed in cultural, political, and intellectual achievements, are manifest. It can be argued that the circumstances under which black Americans have created a life way necessitated a strongly integrated social organization and a resolute adherence to a system of values in order to survive as a people. (Author/JM)

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HUMANISM IN BLACK CULTURE

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The local chapter of the NAACP in a predominantly Black Southern Illinois city was holding its annual banquet in a white-owned and managed establishment; the master of ceremonies, who owns the largest local funeral home, opened his remarks with a reference to the evening's menu: "Some people don't know the chicken has other parts besides white meat; we know it has legs and, yes, even feet: we've eaten those, too...But now that I've arrived (he went on to affirm) I enjoy these chicken breasts..."

These and similar comments throughout the evening, stressing the contrast between the formal function being attended and the life ways of the Black community as the "mc" portrayed them, received enthusiastic response. He observed that had they been in church, the warm applause given a young woman for her spirited rendition of a spiritual would have been an accolade, with people shouting "amen" and "go on honey." While these observations were ostensibly for the benefit of the night's speaker--an important official of the national organization--and for the few white persons present, more importantly, they constituted an appeal to unity addressed to the heterogeneous group, including wealthy and poor, businessmen and businesswomen, college-educated and barely literate, young and old, joined in dedication to the social and economic advancement of Black Americans.

When challenged by divisive elements in Black communities, leaders appeal to shared experiences, at least shared memories, in order to achieve rapport, to heighten group consciousness

and to spur to action. There are frequent references to aspects of human experience that are ignored or neglected by "middle America": poverty, human vulnerability and spirituality. These rituals of unification, which permeate Black community life, are celebrations of the fundamental health and wisdon of the Black person and of strength in the face of adversity. They embody "soul" and "style," which Johnetta Cole (1970) identifies in several variant Black life styles; she characterizes "soul" as involving "long-suffering," "deep emotion," and "a feeling of oneness with all Blacks," and "style" as "keeping cool under pressure." While "style" and "soul" assume different expressions throughout Black communities, she finds that in all groups they take precedence over other, non-Black values.

Given the heterogeneous character of Black communities, we need to identify the boundaries of "Black culture." I would concur with Frederick Barth (1969) in his definition of ethnic groups as primarily social, rather than cultural groups, whose membership shares a common origin, operates in a field of interaction and communication, and distinguishes itself from other comparable groups. (p. 11) As he asserts, ethnic identity trancends important internal cultural differences and encompasses cultural items shared with other groups. However, as Abner Cohen (1969) has pointed out, a common origin and history often result in shared "compulsory" institutions, such as kinship and religion, within an ethnic group; while the values and customs surrounding these institutions may or may not be

consciously activated in a search for "ethnic identity" and political unity by a minority group, depending on the socio-political climate, they nevertheless operate to bring about social cohesion on a basic level. Applying this view to Black Americans, we can identify Black culture in terms of certain institutions and values which they share as members of an ethnic group, while recognizing that individual families and communities identify in important respects with other groups. The nature and scope of such a shared life way is open to investigation; it is my intent in the following discussion to contribute to such investigation into the nature of Black culture.

The ascription of a humanistic character to Black culture--defined as those values and institutions which Black Americans have in common that are not shared by the majority of Americans--is a prevalent theme in the Black movement; this view is counterposed to that of American society generally as materialistic in its emphasis. Humanism refers to a recognition of essential human characteristics--experience, feelings, a sense of personal worth--as contrasted with an instrumental evaluation in terms of success, competence, "personality". While Blacks admire characteristics leading to success, they regard them as essentially strategies rather than personal qualities; but when competence or success are achieved with the qualities of "style" and "soul," they are felt to be genuine expressions of self, rather than means or ends assumed under external pressure to succeed or conform. Thus, achievements are, in good Renaissance fashion, "ornaments of the person" rather than reflections of duty or social pressure.

The social recognition of innate human qualities such as "style" and "soul" indicates a sensitivity in social relationships and a culture that is basically humanistic in orientation. While in the society at large the acquisition of property and financial security is a primary goal, among Blacks material aims are more likely to be means leading to the enhancement of self and the appreciation of ones peers as the final end. The contrast is made vivid by the scornful comments of a young man concerning the behavior of businessmen during the 1929 crash: "You wouldn't catch us jumping off a building because the banks closed."

When confronted by behavioral variants, such as those of many Black Americans, social scientists have shown a tendency prematurely to employ categories relating unfamiliar behavior to the familiar and comprehensible, ignoring possible value differences. Translating terms that are often applied to Black cultural expressions into descriptive statements, we find that they involve, in many instances, essentially negative concepts: thus, "pragmatic" when applied to a Black person means he is not committed to a particular set of ideals, such as legalism, self-reliance, puritanism; "expressive" refers to the fact that certain feelings or impulses are expressed that are suppressed in the observer or his culture; "arbitrary" characterizes behavior that is not "rationalized" according to the values of the observer. The significance of the behavior in the value system of the actor-- the positive determination of the concept-is often left unresolved; or, even when it is dealt with, tne terms, with their unspoken bias, continue to mislead those who are not familiar with Black social organization. Blacks, who are

sensitive to negative connotations, may see them as euphemisms for expressions they know only too well: "pragmatic" becomes "opportunistic"; "expressive" is translated into "uninhibited"; "arbitrary" means "irrational". Leaving aside value judgements and emotional overtones, it is apparent that these behavioral categories are essentially artifacts of a particular value system, namely, one in which expressive and assertive needs are translated into narrowly focussed drives, leading to socially approved, predominantly materialistic goals.

As an alternative to pejorative or apologetic approaches to the study of Black society, anthropologists might consider the proposition that Black Americans, constituting a minority that has been, in turn, despised, partronized, or tolerated, but never granted full membership in this society, have nevertheless maintained a tradition in which personal and social integrity, as expressed in cultural, political and intellectual achievements, are manifest. Black self-expression has been characterized as "deviant," "compensatory," "adjustive," and "adaptive"; all of these terms imply a divergence from a standard to which Blacks aspire, or by which they are judged. It seems gratuitous to single out Black culture or behavior as adaptive, since all effective behavior is adaptive, and all living cultures adapt. If it is implied that Blacks, in contrast to other Americans, act with little reference to traditions or moral codes, then this view is racist in implication. The assumption appears to be that Black Americans, confronted with the damaging consequences of racism and minority status, have been prevented from either developing a culture of their own or assuming that of White

Americans; thus living in a cultural limbo they have expediently altered their behavior to fit the conditions and rules they encounter without any real social integrity. A contrary position can be argued, that the circumstances under which Black Americans have created a life way necessitated a strongly integrated social organization and a resolute adherence to a system of values in order to survive as a people. While they are occasionally pragmatic and adaptive in relation to the dominant system, they are firm about their own beliefs. From the White point of view it may appear that Blacks tolerate a high degree of irregularity in their social arrangements; however, from the Black perspective the behavior categorized by the social scientist as "irregular" may represent a different type of social organization carrying its own ethical implications and moral prescriptions.

Black Americans have on occasion been praised for how well they have done in the face of great odds; rarely, however, is it affirmed that despite spiritual scars and physical suffering and deprivation they have achieved through their stuggles a unique and positive way of life. A pervasive conservatism among the social disciplines promotes an unwillingness to recognize that Black Americans have developed a distinctive and operative culture. While the particular expression of humanism in Black culture reflects a history of tragedy and trial, it is based on more substantial grounds than emotive experience. It is the product of Black institutions--religion, community associations, the family--which differ fundamentally from those of most other Americans. Black religion and associations have been recognized as genuine

cultural expressions; but the Black family, for the most part, has been viewed as a pathological, at best, adaptive deviation from that of White middle Americans. Yet, cross-cultural comparisons indicate that family systems are, among social institutions, most conservative and resistant to change. If we view the Black family as a highly structured institution with a tradition and an associated set of values, rather than as an ad hoc response to specific conditions, we may discern in its processes a primary source of the distinctive value system of Black Americans. In the family there exists a potential for the expression of deep feeling, for a sense of personal worth and of unity--the basis for "soul" and "style"--that is never quite attained in other relationships; given a strong family organization and a wide extension of the forms and symbolism of kinship into the community, the view of Black culture as humanistic becomes highly comprehensible.

The prevailing view concerning the Black family is that it suffered destruction under the conditions of slavery and never recovered from the devastating experience. Ethnographies of African communities describe complicated kinship organizations that control social and political life; these are considered to have disappeared, along with language, political organization and other aspects of African societies, under the impact of Slavery. Yet, as has been noted by sociologist Joyce Ladner (1971) historian George Rawick (1971) and others, the conditions of slavery in most instances resulted in unity and common cause, reinforcing shared values. Rawick argues that while we cannot look for a "simple retention" of African traits among Black Americans, still, the memories, habits and skills of slaves were brought with them and transmitted to their children as a basis for the development

of a new way of life. Dramatic confirmation for this view is the experience of Alex Haley,[1] who in a forthcoming book describes how the traditions about his slave ancestor, "The African," and the knowledge about his homeland which he imparted were taught to his children and later transmitted through the generations. Although this type of tradition is rare, it reveals the existence of socialization that was likely occurring on a covert basis on many plantations.

In a strong statement concerning Black culture, Robert Blauner (1970) comments, "It is because Black Americans have undergone unique experiences in America, experiences that no other national or racial minority or lower class have shared that a distinctive ethnic culture has evolved. Though this culture is overwhelmingly the product of American experience, the first contributing source is still African." (p. 52) While some aspects of Black culture stem from lower-class status, e.g., "soul food," these traits are modified and institutionalized, becoming "conscious, expected and infused with value." Thus, they become symbols of group identify and a source of group cohesivenss, resulting in culture-building on an intensive level. Far from being demoralized and disorganized, Black Americans are seen as a dynamic cultural component in American society.

While it is certain that much was lost and forgotten in the constant pressures and surveillance of the plantation system, evidence for the survival of values related to family and kinship can be found in accounts of slaves. Frederick Douglass writes of slaves who refused to escape when they had a chance because of strong affection binding them to families, relatives and friends.

He describes his deep regard for his grandmother who raised him, and the impression made upon him by his mother, whom he seldom saw, attributing his later intellectual achievements to the fact that she could read. (1892) According to Ladner (1971), the frequent separation of husband and wife, parents and children, usually cited as a cause for the destruction of the Black family, did not subvert the concept of family, and the strong feelings for kinsmen and kinswomen and the idea that families would be reunited permeated the emotional lives of slaves.

After examining the evidence from slave narratives, Rawick (1972) concludes that there were more stable kinship units than has been thought; while the political role of kinship as found in African societies was largely lost, other functions such as socialization and economic cooperation were still important. While the forms which kinship groups assumed were undoubtedly different than African prototypes, they shared more similarity with them than with the European based "conjugal" family type. Rawick characterizes the Southern plantation as a "generalized extended kinship system" (p. 93) in which all adults took responsibility for all children, pointing out that it was probably more functional in a situation where both mother and father were working in the fields than was the nuclear family. Just as the tribal groups and therefore the tribal consciousness of of the displaced Africans were broken up, to be replaced by the idea of "we" referring to the total community of Black Americans, so were the ties and obligations of corporate kin groups extended to include a resident community.[2]

Douglass describes the working group which he joined upon being taken from his grandmother as a group of peers, including siblings and cousins as well as non-relatives, charged to a group of elders who were respectfully addressed as "Aunt"and "Uncle". He portrays a regime in which discipline was strict, noting, "There is not to be found among any people a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect than is maintained among them...there is no better material in the world for making a gentleman than is furnished in the African." (p. 93) There is evidence that such practices were widespread, indicating that although the ruthless tactics employed in separating families brought about much suffering, the ultimate effects on the Black family were perhaps not as des - tructive as has been supposed.

Extended families in African societies and in other parts of the world, in contrast to conjugal families, are not based on the primacy and exclusiveness of the husband-wife and parent-child tie; characteristically, children are considered the responsibility and charge of the entire kin group. If parents die or are unable to take care of their children, they are raised by other relatives as a matter of course; and in age-graded societies they are removed from their mothers at an early age to join a group of peers under the guidance of other adults. These adults are in specific roles vis-a-is children; the idea that a child needs to relate to one adult male or female as a "role model" is the product of a society in which the nuclear family is a relatively isolated, independent group, and in which loyalties outside the immediate family threaten its integrity. When a nuclear family is integrated

into a larger kin group, the resources of a number of adults are made available to the child; since he has different relationships to each of them, he attains a complex social knowledge at an early age.

In Douglass' Autobiography there is abundant evidence of teaching and socialization of younger by older or more educated male slaves. Although boys were separated from their fathers, and in many cases never knew them, there is a strong indication of social surrogates; the prevalence of underground political activities, of slave rebellions and the emergence of leaders such as Douglas, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, as well as the development of a high degree of various skills and intellectual achievements reveal that while they were politically subordinate, male slaves were socialized to an active, socially effective role. The success of the underground railroad and the ease with which slaves adapted to continuous displacement and movement to communities hundreds and even thousands of miles away, where they would accepted and know the rules, as Rawick points out (1972), argue for an effective socialization process and an extensive social cohesion.

If, following Abolition and later, during the Northern migrations, the social and economic conditions encountered by Blacks were not unfavorable to large-scale kinship organization, we can assume a survival of the kinship institutions developed under Slavery, and therefore evidence for the maintenance of Black values and traditions. That they did, in fact, continue, is shown by past and recent studies of Black communities in various localities: Powdermaker's study of a Southern community (1939), Virginia Heyer Young's and Kunkel and Kennard's more

recent studies (1970; 1972); Joyce Ladner's account of families in St. Louis (1971), Carole Stack's work in Chicago (1970) and my own observations in Chicago and Southern Illinois (1973), and Andrew Billinsley's recent study of the Black family (1968). Increasingly, the evidence from studies of families in various communities points to kinship organization on a large scale and the maintenance of a distinctive Black way of life.

The Black families I observed in Chicago were localized kinship groups, consisting of several households which were located in a particular neighborhood or oriented towards a neighborhood with regards to visiting, reunions, and other ritual activities. Much social and economic activity of various kinds takes place among these households, many of which include kin beyond the nuclear family. Households tend to exhibit cyclical regularities, including an extended phase in which sons and daughters live in their parental home with their small children. This practice leads to intensive interaction between households when, later, sons and daughters move out to establish their own menages. When individuals or families move to another city, they tend to move in a family unit of several households or to settle in neighborhoods where there were already relatives. Family celebrations of various kinds, particularly funerals and birthdays, are attended by relatives, often from great distances; thus, family ties are maintained, and the freedom of movement with assurance of social support and acceptance so characteristic of Black Americans is provided for.

In societies with strong kin groups, a high value is often placed on being a mother; many young girls, as Ladner (1971)

reports, feel that bearing children is the primary way to achieve maturity; while among young men there is often a drive to impregnate young women. In contrast to the prevailing value system, there is relatively little stigma attached to illegitimacy as far as the child is concerned; among the Chicago families the view that there are no illegitimate children, only parents, seems to prevail. The adoption of children by relatives, with or without legal action is widely practiced, and if a mother is unable to give a child the necessary care, a grandmother or aunt or even a neighbor is usually available; in any case, children are socialized in an enviornment in which adults other than their parents were present and involved to some degree in their upbringing. While these practices and attitudes vary in degree from one Black community to another, the overall thrust of the Black ethic is towards a climate of acceptance for the child, encouraging the development of a sense of personal worth despite unfavorable external social or economic conditions.

Discipline and parental authority are stressed in Black families, as among Douglass' contemporaries; however, in my observation, most children experience at least one close, relatively permissive relationship with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other adult. Furthermore, in Black extended families, in which many adults are active participants, children are early made aware of the relativity of power and the existence of many points of view as strong personalities cross each other and as important issues are debated in their presence. Adults, including husband and wife, maintain an ideal of independence, and extended obligations among kin does not mean the suppression of individuality. The child is taught to respect individual automomy in certain areas of life, yet at the same time experiences

an ordered, if constantly changing social world.

The importance of the social role of father in Black families has generally been underestimated. Most Black households include both mother and father; but even in matrifocal households, uncles, older brothers, grandfathers, as well as non-resident fathers and male friends of mother assume responsibility for children of single mothers. In households where a father is in residence, he usually plays a dominant, if qualitatively different role from that in most White families. Possibly recalling a heritage of slavery, Black men are often wary of entrapment in domestic situations in which they are expected to conform and become predictable, thus subject to control. Nevertheless, they assume domestic responsibilities, while maintaining a degree of independence, and they take an interest in children, whether their own or others'. In relating to a number of adult males, the Black child experiences a variety of roles for men other than breadwinner and disciplinarian; he hears many sides of every issue and becomes cognizant of many aspects of his social environment at an early age.

While the child in a conjugal family system learns alternative roles and values largely through outside organizations--boy--and girl-scouts, religious youth groups, schools--which integrate the family into the community, children in Black extended families observe and learn a variety of social behavior and experience a continous dialectic concerning proper behavior within the family setting, as well. Further, the primary character of kin relationships is extended into the community as friends and neighbors participate in disciplining and "watching out" for children; and

in associations--religious groups, youth peer groups and women's and men's societies--the symbolism and sentiments of kinship prevail. Far from being pragmatic in character, social relationships among Blacks involve strong concepts of loyalty and concern, referred to as "caring." The frequent loans and exchanges of many kinds among family and friends reflect a sense of obligation and committment on the part of the giver more than an opportunism, or instrumental view of human relations on the part of the receiver; although there are those who take advantage and whose actions come under moral censure. A giver has an obligation, in turn, to see that he is not made a "fool" of, thus subverting the system of reciprocity. Although an individual is expected to share, his autonomy is respected: he may choose his own time, place, and the extent of his obligations. Sometimes an individual will decide that his personal needs take precedence; at other times he may have little but will give what he has. On the whole, although he is not "self-sacrificing," the willingness of the Black person to give and receive has resulted in the maintenance of social organization that is highly supportive, though also demanding.

An institution of fictive kinship in Black communities suggests that the view of the community, at least the effective community, as a generalized extended kinship system" as Rawick observes of the plantation, is hardly an exaggeration. In Chicago, fictive grandmother-grandchild, mother-daughter, father-daughter, and sibling relationships were identified, the terms of reference being "play-mother," "play-sister," etc., although the expresions "godchild" and "godparents" were sometimes used for informal

fictive ties. In Southern Illinois, "play-cousin,""play-aunt (and) - uncle" and "play-son" were also recorded; and out of 146 respondents, 95% were familiar with these terms and 65% had play-relatives. Children grew up playing with cousins and other relatives, their first contact outside the family often being a play relative. These relationships involve visiting, gift-giving, and small loans of money. Above all, they give the child a sense of a familiar and manageable world beyond his family.

The wide use of kinship forms in Black communities suggests a family institution which, far from representing a "makeshift" operation under conditions of poverty, has been instrumental in maintaining a distinctive Black American culture. The open, dynamic character of family interaction, the positive, though not generally permissive relationship between adults and children, the discipline and rigor of socialization, as well as the extension of kinship into the community speak for a sophisticated, profound sense of social involvement and a strong personal and social indentity. Often secure in his social milieu, the Black child may early encounter failure in an alien system of values, and a society which rejects him and his way of life; this may lead to a hostile reaction to values learned at home and an alienation from his community. His identity problems stem from his reflection by White society rather than from his social background or cultural heritage. The Black person is eminently capable of relating in socially complex situations and of asserting himself; however, a Black man or woman must be exceptionally able or talented in order to achieve recognition of his or her intrinsic worth in a society in which competition for success and the

struggle for selfhood tend to be equated, and the game is zero-sum. His or her way of being human is often interpreted as merely extrinsic--as compensatory, adaptive, or deviant--in a society which channels expressions of self into other more approved or more familiar forms.

In view of increasing evidence of extensive kinship organization in Black communities, we might speculate as to why Blacks have, in the past, apparently accepted pathological assumptions about the Black family: Why has the Black family not been idealized and emphasized in Black ideology? Regarding ethnic groups as political units in a society, Abner Cohen (1969) poses the question in more general terms: "Under what structural conditions, what customs will perform what political functions in which political unit" (p. 213) A tentative answer to these questions might be found in Barth's (1969) characterization of three strategies employed by minority ethnic groups, namely, (1) an attempt to "pass" into the dominant society, (2) accommodation to the larger society by limiting cultural differences to areas of non-articulation with the dominant society while participating to the limit in the latter, (3) emphasis of ethnic identify as a basis for political organization. For Blacks, the first strategy has been unsuccessful because of the "classificatory" nature of racial discrimination; the second, protective strategy has been pre-eminent, with the result that many aspects of Black culture have remained "invisible" to White investigators, though implicitly accepted by Blacks. A depressed status in a society in which a contrasting concept of family and social responsibility is predominant has prevented the elevation

of the Black family into an ideological symbol as it has been, for example, among Jewish-and Italian-Americans. There is evidence that this situation is changing as Black intellectuals are recognizing the strengths of the Black family and emphasizing the collective and cooperative nature of Black social organization, stressing its African affinities and contrasting it with an individualistic, competitive society. While White individualism is described as economic and egoistic, Black individualism is characterized as humanistic, based on social institutions, e.g., the extended family, in which the human rights of all individuals are respected. As an antidote to racism--the systematic attempt to denigrate a people on the basis of genetic relationships--the expression of pride in one's forebears and of kinship with "brothers and sisters" would appear to be particulary effective in unifying and politically mobilizing Black Americans.

Notes:

1. Alex Haley, editor of The Autobiography of Malcolm X (Grove, 1965), in a lecture at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, described his experiences in tracing his geneaology back to 15th Century West Africa with the help of a Zambian griot (oral clan historian); his projected work is entitled Before This Anger.

2. Wade W. Nobles ("African Philosophy: Foundations for Black Psychology," in Reginald Jones, ed., Black Psychology) New York: Harper-Row, 1972, pp. 18-31) stresses the communal, collective nature of Black social organization as a basis for a new Black psychology.

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